

Coin sleuths are tracking the Turin mystery

By Roger Boye

SCIENTISTS ARE asking coin experts for help in unraveling one of the mysteries of the Shroud of Turin, the cloth many believe wrapped the body of Jesus.

The numismatic puzzle involves the likeness of a 5-foot-7-inch crucified man appearing on the shroud. Specifically, scientists say that two buttonlike objects, probably coins, are covering the dead man's eyes.

Those objects first were noted in 1974 when scientists used an image analyzer to put shroud photographs in three-dimensional relief. The "find" has excited many shroud enthusiasts, including the Rev. Francis L. Filas, professor of theology at Loyola University of Chicago and student of the shroud for 30 years.

Father Filas was in Turin, Italy, in October when 30 American scientists conducted 120 consecutive hours of tests on the shroud. Once the new data are analyzed, scientists probably will know for sure if the images are of coins, and if so, perhaps determine — with the help of collectors — the type of coin. (Test results won't be made public until mid-1980.)

Precise identification of the disklike objects is important to authenticating the shroud itself. For example, if the round, flat images are of coins minted during the time of Jesus, scientists will have one more piece of evidence to use in dating the shroud, according to three shroud scholars writing in *The Numismatist*. Two of the men, scientists John Jackson and Eric Jumper, have spent thousands of hours studying shroud photographs and other evidence.

As part of their work, the three scholars also studied ancient burial customs, concluding that first-century Jews often used coins or pottery fragments to keep the eyes of the dead closed in the grave. Coins — not pottery — probably would have been used in a hurried burial, they added.

For Father Filas, the probable coin images are the "absolute, final proof" that the shroud is not a fake made in the 13th Century, as some persons have suggested.

"No 13th-Century forger could have known about the Jewish burial custom (in use) at the time of Christ," he said.

Meanwhile, Jackson and Jumper want coin collectors to identify the kinds of coins that could have rested on the eyes of the body in the shroud. One hobbyist quoted in *The Numismatist* article believes that if the man is indeed Jesus, the coins are probably bronze leptons of Pontius Pilate, minted from 29 to 31 A.D.

The leptons, showing a soothsayer's wand but not Caesar's face, probably were used by orthodox Jews. Also, the size and shape of the leptons fit the shroud image perfectly, the hobbyist said.

However, some other numismatists don't agree. The "wand lepton" was not put into circulation until after the crucifixion, said Mel Wacks, one of three ancient coin experts writing about the shroud in other issues of *The Numismatist*. He contends the coins are probably a variety called the mite, showing three ears of barley and a ceremonial ladle.

All coins of Pilate, including the mite, "feature objects associated with a pagan religion, and they likely were not enthusiastically received by the orthodox Jewish population," Wacks added.